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The Paul Barker Ethnographic Research in Haiti, 1950s-1960s: Assessing the USM VodouCollection

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The Paul Barker Ethnographic Research in Haiti, 1950s-1960s: Assessing the USM Vodou Collection

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Introduction

The Collection was obtained by Paul Barker, a faculty member of the Gorham State Teachers College, during the period of 1950-1960s (see Figures 1-4, 7). It is compiled of religious artifacts mostly relating to Haitian Vodou, with a few objects from Africa and the Dominican Republic. Haitian Vodou is heavily influenced by aspects of African religions that traveled to the Americas on the slave trade. It shares some characteristics with Louisiana Voodoo, Santeria, and other Afro-Caribbean religions who were also influenced by religions being introduced to the Americas by means of the slave trade. Each religion developed distinct characteristics shaped by the separate histories and influences of their geographic locations. In Haiti, the predominantly African rituals blended with elements of native religions and Christianity to create Haitian Vodou. This blending of religious elements is seen elsewhere across the African Diaspora, showcasing the survival and adaptability of African culture in the face of intense hardship.



Figure 1. Location of Tortuga Island, Northern Haiti. Photo by: <http://www.haitifoundation.org/Haiti.html>



Figure 2. General landscape of the region of Barker's research, Northern Haiti. Photo by: P Barker



Figure 3. Ethnology staff meeting with Professor Barker. Photo by: P. Barker



Figure 4. Paul Barker in a cave west of Three River, Northern Haiti.

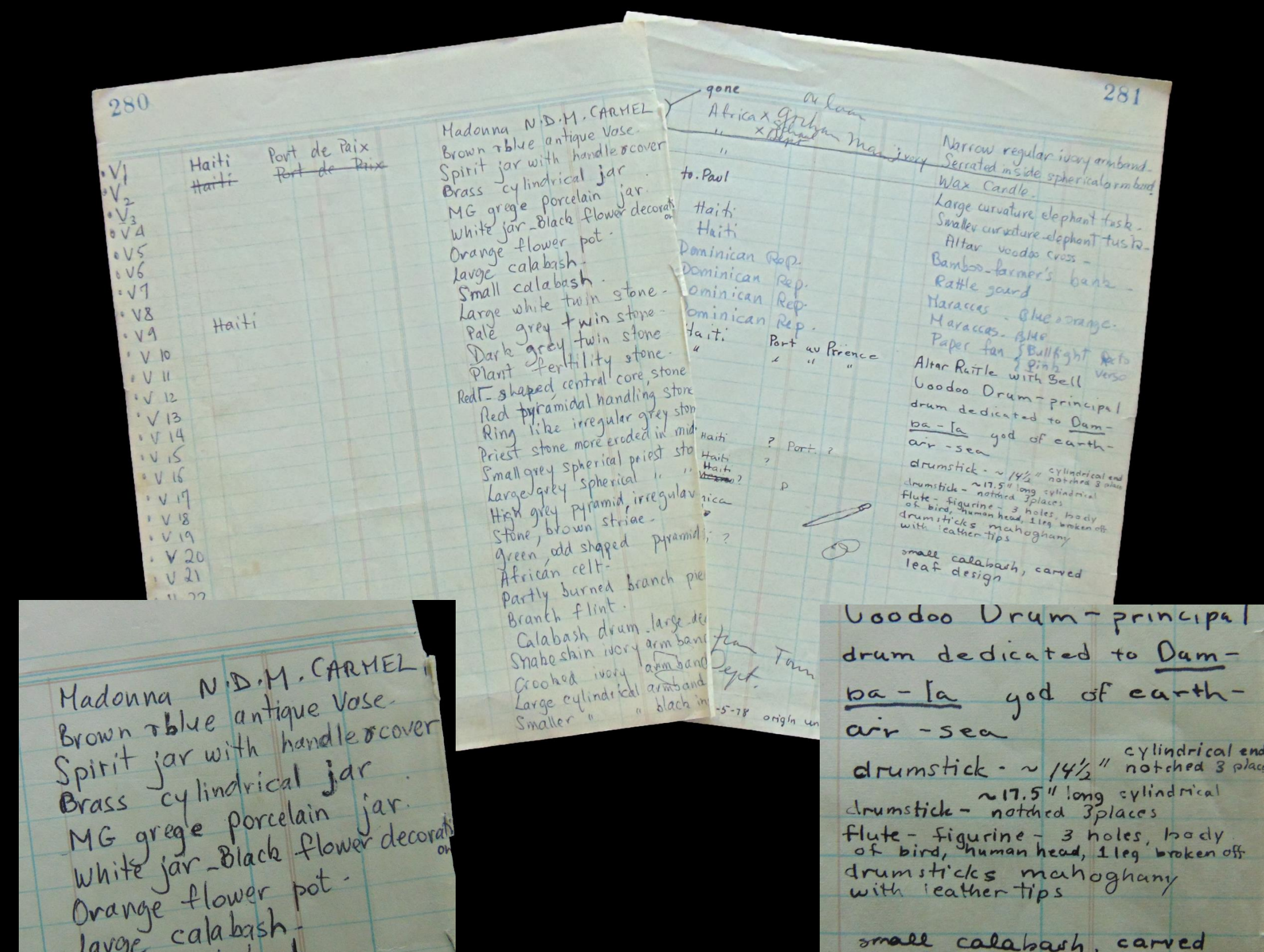


Figure 5. Original catalog pages from the Museum of Man at Gorham State Teachers College. Documents ethnographic collections made by Paul Barker in northern Haiti and West Africa.

Curation and research of this collection (see Figure 5) can provide context to the survival and movement of cultural and religious practices across the middle passage. Furthermore, it showcases the unique and regionally specific adaptations of Vodou, and other African derived religions, across the African Diaspora. Curation and display of these artifacts can assist in educating the public on often misunderstood, stereotyped, and vilified religions.



Figure 6. Statuette of Virgin Mary wearing a blue and gold scapular and holding baby Jesus. N.D.M Carmel written on base presumably stands for Notre Dame du Mont Carmel, or, Our Lady of Mount Carmel

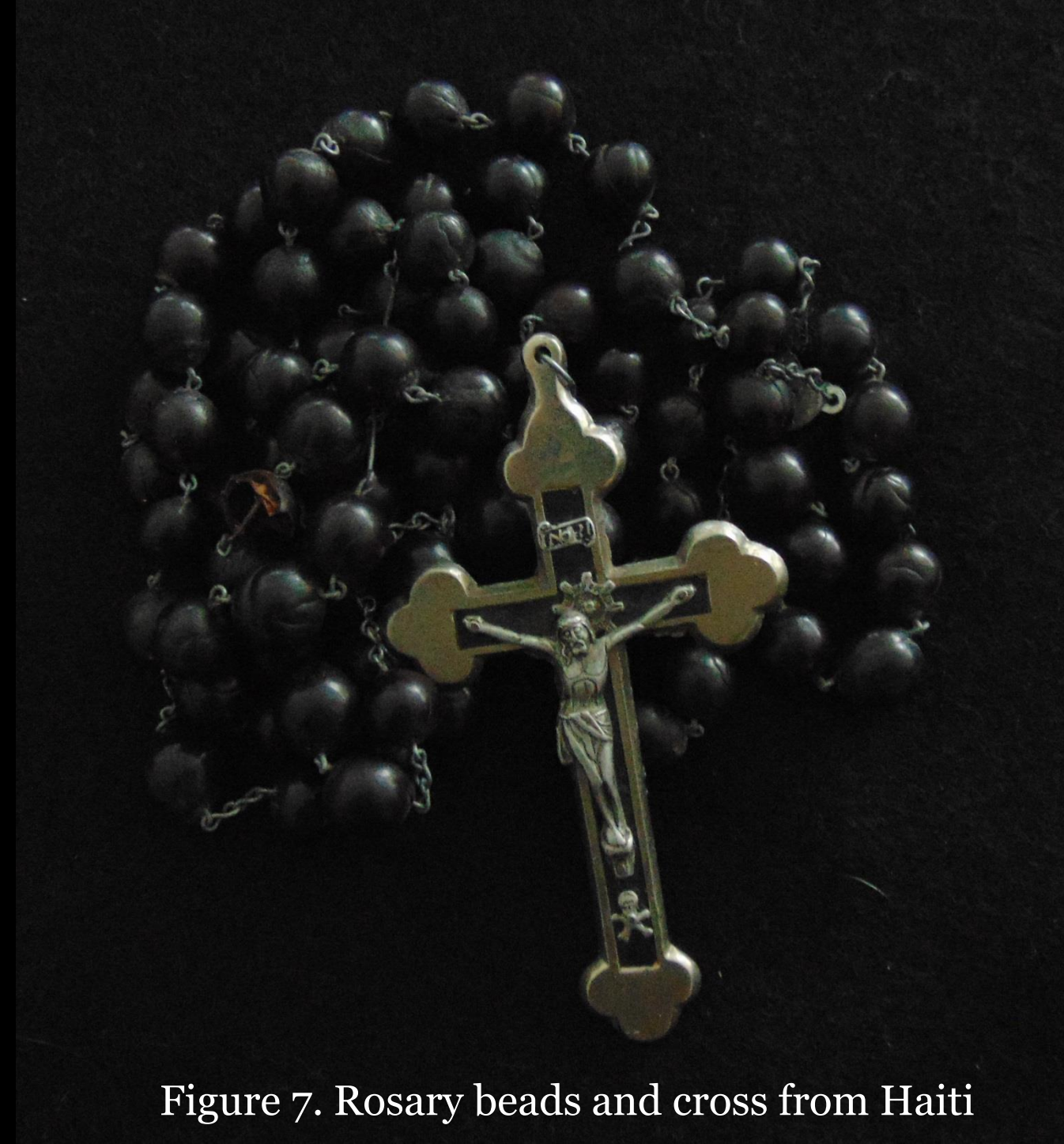


Figure 7. Rosary beads and cross from Haiti



Figure 8. Eliza Cadet and family



Figure 9. Ceramic Vase



Figure 14. Two painted gourd rattles

Methods

Work on this collection included referencing the original field and curation notes written by Paul Barker and scanning these notes to create digital copies (Figure 5). Matching artifacts with their assigned catalogue numbers in the original notes and assigning numbers to artifacts. Creating a digital database of the collection with catalogue numbers and a description of the artifacts. Photographing and editing images of each artifact to create a digital photographic database to accompany the collection see Figures 6-7, 9-14). It also includes background research on objects as well as into the background of Vodou, as well as other African and African derived religions. This can provide important context on the characteristics, purpose, and significance of the artifacts. The artifacts will then be systematically organized and placed into collection boxes where their care will be maintained (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Barker Collection and archival boxes for storage curation

Next Steps

After the collection has been catalogued and a digital database has been created, the collection will be donated to the African American Archives housed in the University of Southern Maine Library's Special Collections. Curation of these artifacts can provide necessary education on a religion that has been repeatedly vilified, exoticized, and misunderstood.



Citation's

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Figure 10. Ivory arm bands collected from Africa

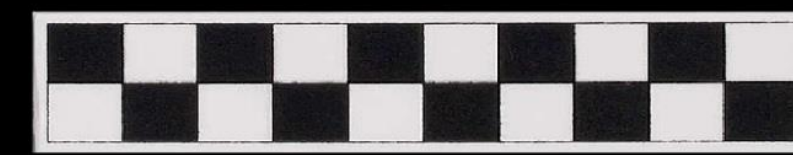


Figure 11. Brass Key



Figure 12. Decoration on gourd and skin drum

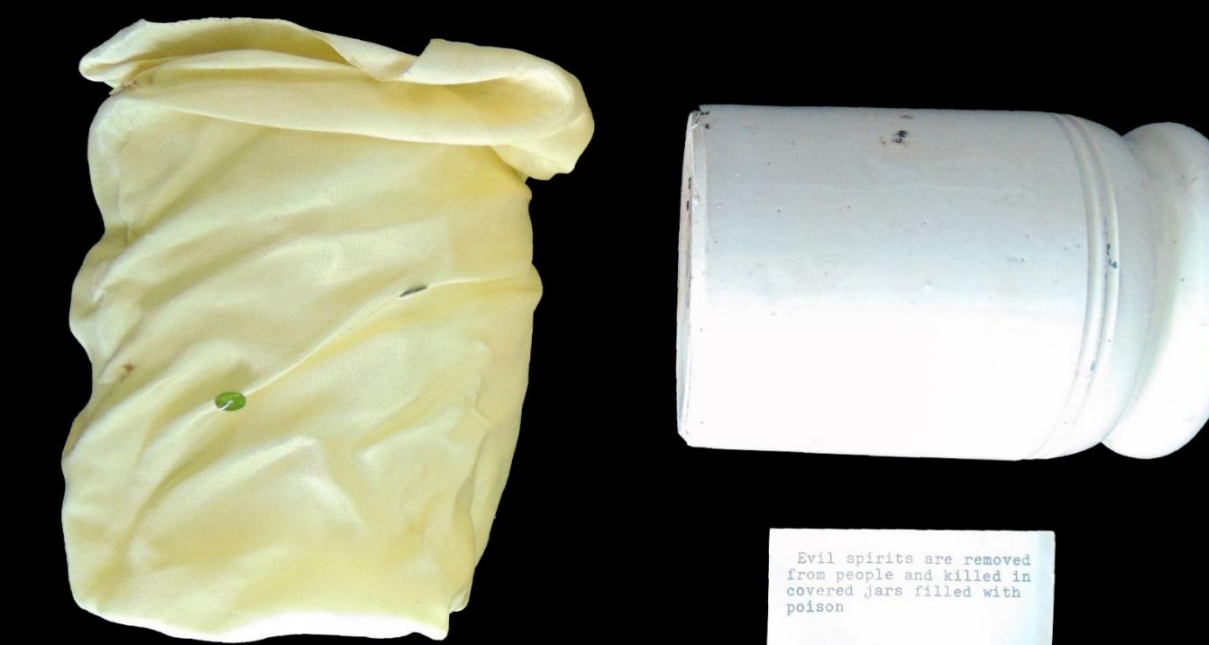


Figure 13. Poison Jar (see note)

